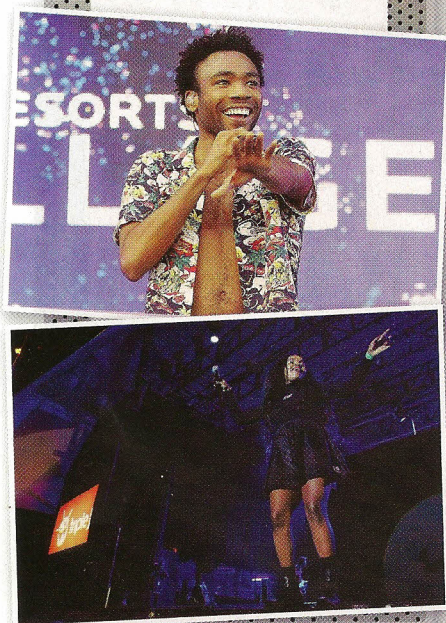
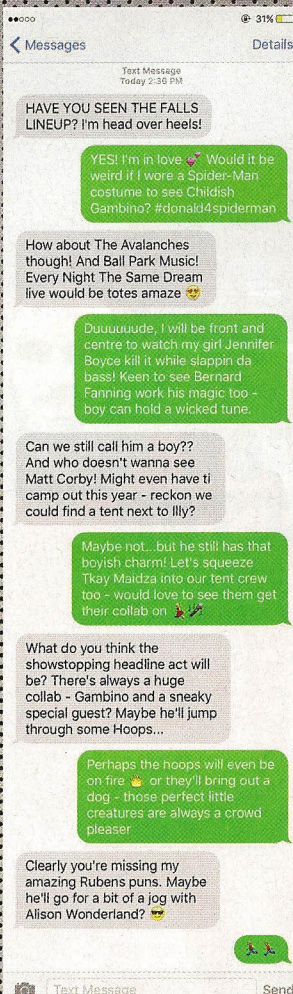


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From Laika, the acclaimed stop-motion creators of *Coraline* and *Boxtrolls*, comes *Kubo and the Two Strings*, the studio's most ambitious project yet. Words: Gill Pringle



The son of Nike scion Phil Knight, Travis Knight grew up playing with dolls, creating lands of make believe filled with miniature figures in his bedroom. Shunning his father's big-bucks sexy world of sports, Travis instead attended Portland State University, interning at Will Vinton studios, a local stop-motion studio which coined the term "claymation," specialising in commercials.

But when recession threatened to close the studio, Phil and Travis Knight stepped in and relaunched it as Laika in 2005, re-imagining it as a film studio. Making its dazzling 2009 film debut with Henry Selick's *Coraline*, the film went on to gross US\$125 million, earning an Oscar nomination for Best Animated Feature.

Successes followed with *ParaNorman* and *Boxtrolls*, although Laika's latest film, *Kubo and the Two Strings*, is possibly its most ambitious project yet.

The antithesis of Disney animated movies, Laika has never shied away from presenting very adult and scary themes, wrapped up in the guise of a children's movie.

When *STACK* meets with Knight, he's bent over a miniature graveyard, adjusting the lens on a mounted camera to get just the right angle. His stage is one of 25 similar stages – populated by skeletons, villages and glittering oceans created from cellophane and coloured lights – scattered about the aircraft hangar-sized studio.

When Laika celebrated its tenth anniversary last year, Knight might have been expected to put on a suit and sit in an office pouring over financial spreadsheets. "But what would be the fun in that?" asks the President/CEO in his customary t-shirt and jeans, sporting a buzz-cut.

Instead, he stepped up his game, with *Kubo and the Two Strings* actually serving as his

directorial debut.

Based on an original story by Marc Haimes, *Kubo* is a young boy who must find a magical suit of armour worn by his late father in order to defeat vengeful family spirits from the past.

"At the core of our mission we always strive to tell new and original stories, things that are thematically rich, emotionally resonant, are challenging in some way and tell beautiful stories. Every single time out we try to do something new. We don't want to keep repeating ourselves," says Knight, 43, who put in long 15-hour days working side by side with his colleagues to realise his latest dream.

Enlisting Charlize Theron, Matthew McConaughey, Rooney Mara and Ralph Fiennes to voice *Kubo's* main players, he says, "I think we have been blessed by the calibre of talent that have been drawn to this film. We have five Oscar-nominated, if not Oscar-winning, actors in a film. That's astounding, that's staggering, particularly for a little ramshackle outfit in the pacific northwest, that we were able to attach that level of talent to our movie.

"These actors could be in any thing, they could have their choice of any script, but the fact that they gravitated to our story just speaks to the quality of the movie, which I'm incredibly proud of, and they give beautiful performances within the film.

"As an artist you make things you want your children to appreciate as well," says Knight, who is married with three kids. "We don't always do things specifically for our kids, but I can imagine that Charlize and Matthew would like to do work that their children can see, experience and enjoy as well."

→ *Kubo and the Two Strings* is in cinemas now, and reviewed on page 26

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